

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE HOLY MAN IN EARLY ISLAMIC MYSTICISM: THE MYRTLE IN A MUSLIM WOMAN'S DREAM AND ITS LATE ANTIQUE ECHOES\*

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### Abstract

This paper brings together an account of an early Muslim woman's dream with texts relating to the 'holy man' and the spiritual hierarchy in early Islam. Both dream account and the holy men texts were authored by the dreamer's husband, the third/ninth century mystic al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, in whose *oeuvre* the holy man, *al-walī*, the 'friend of God', occupies a central position. His writings had a significant impact on the teachings on *wilāya* in Islamic mysticism early and late. The dream and the texts reveal a historical and religious setting in which the God-Man communication was seen as bequeathed from the prophets to the 'friends of God', the *awliyā'*. Al-Tirmidhī's writings offer an early vision of a non-sectarian ideology of the *awliyā'*, which allowed for people with specific qualities to be heralded as carriers of divine inspiration and authority. The veneration of the holy men in early Islam, be they the *awliyā'* or Shī'ite Imāms reflects the beliefs, traditions and images which pervaded the religious scene in Late Antiquity prior to the rise of Islam. In Judaism, Christianity,

\* The material for this paper has been collected and assimilated for a very long time. I first encountered the image of the myrtle at its heart while working on my PhD dissertation on al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī under the supervision of Prof. Shaul Shaked: it is to Shaul Shaked that my deepest gratitude goes, for input included in this paper and much beyond. During the years in which this paper has been a work-in-progress I benefited from comments of friends and colleagues. I would like to thank specifically those to whom I have shown various drafts: Ella Almagor, Meir Bar-Asher, Brouria Bitton-Ashkeloni, Sarah Japhet, Menachem Kister, Ze'ev Maghen, Guy Stroumsa and Sarah Stroumsa. I have not always followed each and every piece of advice given me — the responsibility for all shortcomings, therefore, is my own. Finally, special thanks go to two young scholars with whom I have been working closely as supervisor: to Michael Ebstein for his constant wise assistance and to Guy Ron-Gilboa, especially for spotting the lacunae in my acquaintance with ancient Mesopotamian sources; both helped in widening and corroborating comparative and philological aspects of this paper.

Manichaeism and other Gnostic schools such as Mandaeism, notions and depictions of the 'holy men' were widespread and pervasive. Similar notions and depictions in early Islam are neither sheer borrowings nor an entirely independent and original development. They continue and confirm spiritual trends and patterns which had persisted for centuries in the rich religious and cultural sphere, while forging a distinctive theological environment and formulating an indigenous religious vocabulary.

### Influences and Echoes

Transaction of ideas and cultural patterns from one denominational group to another is sometimes referred to by the term 'influence'. Tracing literary and cultural influences of one corpus upon another has been founded in academia on a scrupulous philological and historical methodology. This methodology has been passed on from teachers to students mostly as an oral didactic tradition that has to be adhered to. What it teaches is mainly this: establishing cultural or literary transactions between groups or individuals has to be argued from the platform of a proficiency in the languages involved, skills in comparative philology, a familiarity with the literary corpora extant at particular times and places, and an acquaintance with the historical contexts which afforded such transactions. These parameters conceptually revolve around a binary imagery of an influencing agent/corpus vis-à-vis a recipient, the one/the corpus under influence. Often enough, not only are the borrowings and indebtedness of the recipient brought to bear, but also his awareness of these, be this transparent or opaque, assertive or defensive. Influence and reception call for a degree of awareness and choice on the part of the potential recipient or, in contrast, an act of shunning and rejection. In the study of early Islam, a case in point is the disparate views within it as regards the question of influences from Jewish or Christian sources. An example can be adduced from a well-known enquiry into the different interpretations given by Muslim authors to an early *ḥadīth*: '*ḥaddithū 'an banī isrā'īla walā ḥaraja*' (Transmit in the name of the Children of Israel for there is no blame in it).<sup>1</sup> Whatever interpretation is brought to bear by way of supporting or rejecting the implication of this tradition, its bearers show awareness of the cultural issue of a potential influence.

<sup>1</sup> See M.J. Kister, '*Haddithū 'an banī isrā'īla wa-lā ḥaraja*: a Study of an Early Tradition', *IOS* 2 (1972), 215–39.

But transactions of cultural patterns from old into new historical spheres occur also less conspicuously, in ways that preclude open partisan discourse, but suggest that the process may also work in undercurrent permeation, either by *osmosis* or by *inertial* continuity. Indeed, cultural processes that took place in early Islam show that the highly developed and rich traditions of Late Antiquity, be they Christian, Jewish, Gnostic, Pagan, Zoroastrian or even Indian — traditions which had been active and present for centuries in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Iran and elsewhere — could not and did not disappear overnight with the Muslim conquests and settlement; rather, Muslims in these areas, be they converts or inborn, either adopted cultural models of these ancient traditions or, simply, carried them on. An Islamic clean break from all cultural and religious patterns which had preceded is hard to conceive.

In describing occurrences deriving from *osmotic* or *inertial* cultural continuities, the use of 'influence' is hardly suitable; what is at play here is better designated as 'echoes', 'traces', or 'residues'.<sup>2</sup> Whereas 'influence' usually denotes borrowings or adaptations from a well-defined source or corpus, the terms 'residues' or 'echoes' allude to cultural patterns which had been widely diffused among a variety of religious communities, so much so that a common pool, like a cultural lingua franca, had been at work, disabling scholarship from conclusively associating such patterns with one or another of their possible sources of origin.

Thus, literary evidence shows and sound deliberation accepts that ideas, concepts and images prevalent in cultures which had become subservient and overpowered are retained by individuals and communities long after their time-marked downfall, and that these ideas, concepts and images take a long time to peter out and disappear altogether. Absorbed into the new culture, they may take on new forms and expressions commensurate with the values of their new denominational milieu, and rather than disappear, they subsist and surface up wherever they find an outlet. Such an outlet may be found in areas which lie outside of the consensual mainstream

<sup>2</sup> For critical observations concerning scholarly approaches to the question of relationships which exist, or do not exist, between similar materials within two (or more) literary corpora, a relationship that is variably named influence, borrowing, intertextuality etc., see Z. Maghen, 'Intertwined Triangles: Remarks on the Relationship between Two Prophetic Scandals', *JSAI* 33 (2007), 17–92, especially the lengthy note 6, pp. 19–20.

denominational tenets, for example, in rare ego-documents such as autobiographies, correspondences and diaries.

Such private materials can be found in writings from the formative period of Islamic mysticism; writings dated to the mid second/eighth up to the late third/ninth centuries, which predate the consolidation of what became known as Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) and the emergence of the classical Sufi compilations. In academic research, the exploration of pre-Islamic echoes in mystical literature has been hesitant and tentative. Early pre-compilation mystical literature and the residues of pre-Islamic themes to which it testifies, is still an almost uncharted field. The study of the stage during which nascent Islam was absorbing and assimilating rather than transmitting, may be tangential to current trends of viewing Islam as a self-contained religious and cultural entity. Nevertheless, an attempt to search for the cultural and religious developments which contributed to the makeup of Islamic spirituality in its formative period cannot be fruitful without following the traces of pre-Islamic themes and without attentiveness to their long lasting 'echoes' in Islamic literature. In tracing such residues in early Islam my aim is to argue for the continuous presence of late antique motifs in the Islamic sphere. The following enquiry can be viewed as a case in point for such an argument. In closer resolution, its aim is to expose some of the pre-Islamic cultural strata which have contributed to the build-up of the notions of 'holy men' and 'spiritual hierarchy' in early Islam and especially within its mystical tradition. My enquiry revolves around the recurring image of the myrtle in various sources. Its starting point is a dream of an unnamed but identifiable ninth-century Muslim woman from Transoxania in which the myrtle has an important symbolic (and perhaps also ritualistic) function.

The paper is divided into five sections: the dream; the myrtle as symbol for the righteous (i.e. the 'holy man'); the ubiquitous idea that the world cannot exist without the righteous; notions of the inner hierarchy within the realm of the righteous; and conclusions, in which the focus is on the centrality of the figure of the holy man in late antique traditions.

### Umm 'Abd Allāh's Dream

The story of this unnamed woman, whom I shall address as Umm 'Abd Allāh, takes place in the middle of the third/ninth century at

the town of Tirmidh<sup>3</sup> in Central Asia. Umm 'Abd Allāh is a fictitious name but not a fictitious character; I have borrowed her *kunya* (nickname) from her husband's. Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, a prolific author who laid down the typology of 'sainthood' (*wilāya*)<sup>4</sup> at this early period of Islamic mysticism, left a short autobiographical account, the first of its kind in the history of Islamic literature.<sup>5</sup> Not only is it the first extant text in the autobiographical genre in Arabic, it is also unique as a document that describes at first hand mystical experiences and dreams. The dreams and experiences which he recorded had been experienced and dreamed by himself as well as by his wife, whose name he does not disclose in spite of the loving manner in which he relates to her. Abū 'Abd Allāh's small and highly personal journal allows us to observe two rather unusual literary phenomena: first, the interlacing of oral with written materials; and, second, the occasional inclusion of Persian within the Arabic text. In the recording of the wife's dreams and experiences, as well as in the general style of this autobiographical text, the written reports retain the features of a free flowing oral discourse between husband and wife. Moreover, it is probable that their conversations were conducted in Persian, the family's daily spoken language. This is clearly reflected in the words, phrases and sentences spoken by the wife in Persian and scattered by the husband within his Arabic text. It has already been observed that this is a rare example

<sup>3</sup> Today this town is known as Termez; it is situated on the northern bank of the Oxus River, on the border of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars and linguists, modern as well as traditionalist, prefer the form *walāya*. For a lengthy discussion of various points concerning the use of either of these terms, see V.J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, TX 1998), xvii–xxi.

<sup>5</sup> There exist two editions of this text: (1) M.Kh. Masud, 'Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's *Buduww Sha'n*', *Islamic Studies* 4 (1965), 315–44 and (2) O. Yaḥyā (ed.), *Bad' sha'n*, printed with Yaḥyā's edition of al-Tirmidhī's *Khatm al-awliyā* (Beirut 1965), 14–32. B. Radtke and J. O'Kane included an annotated translation of *Bad' sha'n* in their *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism* (Richmond 1996), 14–36. Radtke published also a German translation of the text together with a facsimile of the Waliyuddin MS in his article 'Tirmidiana Minora', *Oriens* 34 (1994), 242–98. For the autobiographical genre in Arabic literature, see D.F. Reynolds (ed.), *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley 2001); for al-Tirmidhī's autobiography, see M. Cooperson (trans.) *ibid.*, 119–31; cf. D.F. Reynolds, 'Symbolic Narratives of Self: Dreams in Medieval Arabic Autobiographies', in P.F. Kennedy (ed.), *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden 2005), 261–86, esp. 270–2.

of a third/ninth-century use of Persian in a written form.<sup>6</sup> These features emphasize the immediate and barely edited — and thus authentic — character of the text at hand.

In one of the dreams that Umm ‘Abd Allāh dreams and that Abū ‘Abd Allāh records the central image is of a figure — evidently an angelic messenger — holding two kinds of plants: in his left hand he holds sweet basil branches (*rayāḥīn*), which, at the time of the dream, seem to be withered; in his right hand he holds green myrtle twigs (*ās akḥḍar raṭb*). The dream figure conveys to the dreamer a message in which the two kinds of plants, especially the myrtle, function as key symbols. Umm ‘Abd Allāh, on her part, delivers the dream to her husband, as it is clear to her, and eventually to him too, that the message is directed especially to him and that it is part of the spiritual training to which divine wisdom has ordained him.<sup>7</sup>

This is not the first scholarly exposure of this dream and its unique autobiographical source.<sup>8</sup> In previous exposures, however (including my own),<sup>9</sup> the pre-Islamic traces scattered in it, which I hope to bring out in the following section, have not been highlighted.<sup>10</sup> First, here is the dream; for the sake of a smooth reading of the dream narrative I have placed most of the comparative material in the footnotes:

I saw a big pool (*ḥawḍ*) in a place unknown to me. The water in the pool was as pure as spring water. On the surface of the pool bunches of grapes appeared, white grapes. I and my two sisters were sitting by the pool. We were picking up grapes from these bunches and eating them while our legs were dangling upon the surface of the water; not immersed, only touching the water.

<sup>6</sup> See Radtke and O’Kane, ‘Introduction’, in *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> For the function of the series of dreams as teaching dreams, see S. Svirī, ‘Dreaming Analyzed and Recorded’, in D. Shulman and G.G. Stroumsa (eds), *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming* (New York 1999), 252–73, especially 262, 265, 268; see below, p. 485.

<sup>8</sup> See Radtke and O’Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood*, 24–6; see also Sh. Shaked, ‘Visions in the Iranian Cultural Orbit’, Paper for the conference ‘The World in Antiquity’ held in Moscow in memory of Gregory Bongard-Levin, 23–6 September, 2009 — forthcoming. I am grateful to Prof. Shaked for forwarding to me a draft version of his paper before publication.

<sup>9</sup> See note 7.

<sup>10</sup> Shaked’s paper (see note 8) deals with the overall comparative aspect of ‘visions’ in late antique cultures and contributes to my general observations in this respect; it does not, however, analyse the specific dream images.

I said to my youngest sister: 'Here we are, as you see, eating from these grapes — but who has given them to us?' And lo, a man came towards us, curly-haired, on his head a white turban, his hair loose behind the turban, wearing white clothes.<sup>11</sup>

He said to me: 'Who is the owner of a pool such as this and of grapes such as these?'<sup>12</sup>

He then took me by the hand, raised me and said to me at a distance from my sisters: 'Tell Muḥammad ibn 'Alī to read the verse, "We shall set up just scales (*al-mawāzīn*) on the day of resurrection..." to its end.<sup>13</sup> On these scales neither flour nor bread will be weighed but the speech of this will be weighed' — and he pointed to his tongue; 'and it will be weighed with these and these' — and he pointed to his hands and legs. 'You do not know that excess of speech is as intoxicating as the drinking of wine?'<sup>14</sup>

I said, 'Would you, please, tell me who you are?'

He said: 'I am one of the angels; we roam the earth and our abode is in Jerusalem'.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> White clothes and a white turban are worn by Zoroastrian priests in various ritualistic ceremonies, see e.g. J.W. Boyd and R.G. Williams, 'The Art of Ritual in a Comparative Context', in M. Stausberg (ed.), *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context* (Leiden 2004), 137 note 2; Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London 1979), 67, 167. For the turban worn by Zoroastrian laymen and priests in sacrificial rituals, mentioned by Greek historians, see A. de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden 1997), 113–15. For the Mandaean white dress and turban, see below, p. 479. For a more general view of Zoroastrian presence in early Islam, see M. Zakeri (ed. and trans.), *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb. 'Alī b. 'Ubayda al-Rayḥānī (d. 219/834) and his Jawāhir al-kilām wa-farā'id al-ḥikām*, vol. 1 (Leiden 2007) with thanks to Shaul Shaked.

<sup>12</sup> This rhetorical question alludes, no doubt, to the eschatological pool and to the luscious depiction of Paradise in Muslim tradition, see e.g. Q. 76: 12–21; 88: 10–16 etc.; for the 'pool', as well as the scales (*mīzān*), in what follows, both of which allude to the eschatological scenes on the day of the resurrection of the dead, see A.J. Wensinck, 'Hawḍ', *ET*<sup>2</sup>, vol. 3, 286; A. El-Zein, 'Water of Paradise', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 5, 466; see also J.I. Smith, 'Eschatology', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 2, 44.

<sup>13</sup> Q. 21:47; the verse continues thus: '...so that no man shall in the least be wronged'; for the eschatological allusion of the scales, see the previous note.

<sup>14</sup> Interdictions against excess of speech can be found in many Ṣūfī manuals see e.g. al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* (Cairo 1367/1948), *Bāb al-ṣamt* (chapter on Silence), 57f; for the practice of watching over speech in al-Tirmidhī's works, see e.g. A.J. Arberry and Abdel Qader (eds), *Kitāb al-Riyāḍa* (Cairo 1366/1947), 45ff.

<sup>15</sup> The text reads *nanzilu bayta 'l-maqdisi*, which can also be understood as 'we descend on Temple Mount'; for angels residing in, or descending on, the Temple Mount/Jerusalem, see Mujir al-Dīn al-Ḥanbalī al-'Ulaymī, *al-Uns al-jalīl bi-ta'rikh al-quds wa'l-khalīl* (Amman 1999), vol. 1, 360: 'kulla laylatin yanzilu sab'ūna alfi

Then I saw in his right hand [a bunch] of young green myrtle [twigs] (*ās akhdar raṭb*)<sup>16</sup> and in his other hand<sup>17</sup> two branches of sweet basil (*rayāḥīn*).<sup>18</sup> While he was talking to me he was holding them in his hands.

Then he said: 'We roam the earth and we call on the worshippers (*al-ʿubbād*).<sup>19</sup> We place these herbs on the hearts of the worshippers so

*malakin mina 'l-samā'i ilā masjid bayti 'l-maqdisi...*'. According to some Islamic traditions, al-Khaḍir and Ilyās stay in Jerusalem during the month of Ramaḍān — see e.g. Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh madīnat dimashq* (Beirut 1995), vol. 16, 428; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal is said to have seen al-Khaḍir and Ilyās in Jerusalem, see Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *al-Iṣāba fī tamyīz al-ṣaḥāba* (Cairo 1971), vol. 2, 334. A tradition reported in the name of 'Alī says: 'The abode of al-Khaḍir is Jerusalem' (*maskanu al-Khaḍiri baytu 'l-maqdisi*), see 'Alī b. Burhān al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī, *al-Sira al-ḥalabīyya*, n.d., vol. 3, 133. Curiously, the angel's introduction in the dream is similar to the introduction of the angelic figure in Ibn Sīnā's *Risālat Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*: 'Then he said to me, "As to my country, it is Jerusalem (*ammā baladī fā-madīnatu bayti 'l-maqdisi*). My profession is to be forever journeying, to travel about the world (*ammā ḥirfatī fā'l-siyāḥatu fī aqṭāri 'l-ʿawālīmī*) so that I may know all its conditions..." see Ibn Sīnā, *Risālat Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, ed. A. Amin (Cairo 1952), 45, ll. 10–12. The idioms 'we roam the earth' and 'my profession is to travel about the world' — in both cases using the Arabic root *s-y-h* — is reminiscent of the biblical idiom 'they are the eyes of God who roam the entire land' (Zech. 4:10 using the Hebrew verbal root *š-w-ṭ*, as does Job 1:7) and 'Go, walk about the land' (Zech. 6:5–7 — using the Hebrew verbal root *h-l-k*). The relevance of the visions of Zechariah for our discussion will be elaborated in what follows (see below, pp. 481–5). In Job 1:7, Satan, one of God's messengers (or sons), when asked by God where he was coming from, answers: 'from roaming the earth' (*mi-šūt bā-ʿāreš*). The most poignant biblical reference is to 2 Chron. 16:9 — 'For the eyes of the Lord roam through the entire earth, to strengthen those whose heart is sincere with Him' — as, just as in the dream, it combines the motif of 'God's eyes' with that of strengthening the hearts of the sincere worshippers (I am grateful to Prof. Sarah Japhet for pointing this out to me). The topic of God's roaming messengers, or God's 'eyes' watching over specific earthly zones and reporting to God of their news — a topic with rich comparative connotations — is too wide for the bounds of this paper, but the Mandaean association is noteworthy. See below, p. 478; see also below note 19.

<sup>16</sup> For the ritualistic act of holding the myrtle in the right hand, see below, pp. 476–7.

<sup>17</sup> 'His other hand' is a euphemism common in Islamic parlance for the left hand.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, *rayḥān* itself may mean myrtle and may thus be synonymous with *ās*, see Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab* (Beirut 1956), vol. 6, 19: '*wa'l-āsu ḍarḥun mina 'l-rayāḥīn*'; also 'Abd al-Qādir al-Baghḍādī, *Khizānat al-adab* (Cairo 1881), vol. 2, 362: '*wa'l-āsu... huwa 'l-rayḥānu*'. In our dream text, however, *rayḥān* is contextually contrasted with the myrtle and hence signifies seasonal herbs rather than the evergreen myrtle.

<sup>19</sup> The function of the figure in the dream is to be viewed against a cultural background associated with roaming messengers occasionally depicted as God's eyes

that by them they may carry out acts of worship. And these myrtle twigs we place upon the hearts of the eminently just ones (*al-siddiqūn*) and the ones who possess certitude (*al-mūqinūn*) so that by them they may know what sincerity is (*ṣidq*).<sup>20</sup> These herbs in summer look like this, but the myrtle never changes, neither in summer nor in winter.<sup>21</sup> Tell Muḥammad ibn 'Alī: Don't you wish that these two will be yours?' and he pointed to the myrtle and to the herbs. Then he said: 'God can lift the piety (*taqwā*) of the god-fearing to such a degree that they need not be fearful. Yet He commanded them to be fearful so that they may know it...' <sup>22</sup>

on earth (see also above, note 15). The expression '*uyūn Allāh*, God's eyes, usually denoting human beings who are appointed as God's watchful eyes on earth and as God's special messengers, appears in Islam in various sources, either with references to prophets (see Ibn 'Aṭā's commentary to Q. 54:14 in Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī, *Tafsīr al-sulamī wa-huwa ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* (Beirut 2001), vol. 2, 290), or with reference to 'Alī, God's *awliyā*' or the twelve Shi'ite Imāms (see e.g. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, vol. 13, 309; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib al-Abī Ṭālib*, ed. Yūsuf al-Buqā'ī (Tehran? AH 1421), vol. 3, 316; see above note 15 and especially the references to Zech. 4:10 and 2 Chron. 16:9; for a reference to angels, see Maḥmūd b. 'Abd Allāh al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-qur'ān al-'aẓīm wa'l-sab' al-mathānī* (Beirut n.d.), vol. 27, 83.

<sup>20</sup> The distinction between 'worshippers' (*'ubbād*) in general and eminently just ones (*siddiqūn*) in particular is a central theme in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's work; it lies at the foundation of the binary typology he sees in *wilāya*, the spiritual hierarchy (sometimes translated as 'sainthood'). He develops his teaching on *wilāya* particularly in his *Sīrat al-awliyā*, where he distinguishes between two categories of *awliyā*: those who belong in the first category he variously names *al-ṣādiqūn* (see e.g. 4 §8) and *awliyā ḥaqq Allāh* (e.g. 2 §3; 33 §47; 65 §89). Their spiritual rank is founded on efforts, but these are always appropriated and hampered by the lower-self (*nafs*). Those who belong to the second category are variously named *al-kirām* (e.g. 17 §35), *al-muḥaddathūn* (e.g. 66 §89; 68 §91), *al-siddiqūn* (69 §92; 119 §148) and *awliyā' allāh* (e.g. 2 §3; 33 §48, 72, §93). Their spiritual rank, which stems from God's grace (*minna*) and choice (*iṣṭifā*), is higher than that of the former category. Sincerity (*ṣidq*) is required of both categories, but in itself is insufficient for reaching the uppermost ranks of *wilāya*, see e.g. 34 §50; 44 §§63–4; 94–5 §121. For *al-mūqinūn*, those who possess certitude (*yaqīn*), a quality higher than *ṣidq*, see e.g. 122 §150. For further discussion on the binary typology of the spiritual hierarchy in al-Tirmidhī's works, see below, pp. 487–8.

<sup>21</sup> For the symbolic meaning of the myrtle's evergreenness, see below, p. 475; cf. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck (eds), *Bereschit Rabba* (Jerusalem 1965), vol. 2, 692, ch. 63, §§9–10, a Midrash on Gen. 25:27; English translation H. Freedman and M. Simon, in *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (London 1961), vol. 2, 565, where Jacob is likened to the fragrant myrtle and Esau to a thorn-bush.

<sup>22</sup> The question whether, at the stage of *wilāya*, fear is removed from the *awliyā* as they gain a sense of security (*amn*), is invoked in *Sīrat al-awliyā*. See e.g. 62–3 §87.

Then he plucked some of the myrtle [twigs] from the bunch which he was holding and handed them to me...

He said: 'Take this, and as for these that I hold in my hands, I myself shall take them to him. This is between the two of you; both of you are together at the same place...' Then he said, 'May God bestow on you, O sisters, a garden (*rawḍa*) — not because of your fasts and prayers but because of the goodness of your hearts and because you love the good and do not wish evil...' <sup>23</sup>

I said to him, 'Why don't you say this in front of my sisters?'

He said, 'They are not like you and they are not your equal.'

Then he said, 'Peace be with you' and went away. I woke up.

One can approach this captivating dream from different angles. As we read it, it becomes obvious that it contains eschatological images which could have been dwelled on at length in the pursuit of pre-Islamic materials and sources. Indeed, that pre-Islamic eschatological traditions, especially Zoroastrian, nourished early Islam is a subject widely studied and discussed and references to some of the pertinent studies are not irrelevant for the concern of this paper. <sup>24</sup> From a literary perspective, these eschatological allusions — the pool, the pure water, the white grapes, the scales, the white-haired white-clad figure — help to create the other-worldly tenor of the dream narrative. But my concern is neither with eschatology as such nor with literary tropes, but with the comparative dimension of two aspects of the

<sup>23</sup> The elevation of the goodness of the heart over and above excessive acts of worship is a recurring theme in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's works and will become relevant in the discussion concerning the spiritual hierarchy below. Here are a couple of references: in *Sīrat al-awliyā'* 132 §60, ll. 2–3, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī records the following prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth nabawī*): 'The holy men (*budalā'*) of my people did not enter Paradise due to excessive fasting and praying; they entered it thanks to the goodness of their hearts (lit. chests – *ṣudūr*) and to the generosity of their souls'; for *budalā'* or *abdāl*, see below, note 70. In his *Nawādir al-uṣūl* (Istanbul 1294/1877), ch. 21, 31–2, he records a well-known tradition concerning the superiority of Abū Bakr: 'Abū Bakr did not have superiority [over the other caliphs?] due to his excessive fasting and praying; he had superiority over them because of something that was in his heart'. Cf. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Awliyā'* (Beirut 1993), 12 §8; 27 §57; 28 §58. Many more parallels can be adduced.

<sup>24</sup> For studies on Zoroastrian eschatological presence in Islam, see e.g. E. Yarshater, 'The Persian Presence in the Islamic World', in R.G. Havannisian and G. Sabagh (eds), *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World* (Cambridge and New York 1998), 44; Yarashter relies heavily on Sh. Shaked, *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam*, Variorum Collected Studies, in particular (for eschatology) 144; see also S. Shahid, *The Last Trumpet: A Comparative Study in Christian-Islamic Eschatology* (Longwood 2005).

dream: first, the iconic significance of the myrtle and, second, the teaching concerning the spiritual hierarchy of the *awliyā*, the Friends of God, the holy men of Islam.

### The Myrtle

A comparative study of the function and significance of myrtle in the literature of Antiquity and Late Antiquity yields a wealth of information. The peoples of Antiquity and the religious groups of Late Antiquity held the myrtle in great esteem and ascribed to it therapeutic, ritualistic and magical qualities.<sup>25</sup> *Ās*, the Arabic word for myrtle which our author uses, is a loanword from Aramaic. In Aramaic

<sup>25</sup> The following are selected instances adduced in support of this comparative observation; many similar instances could be brought to bear, but exceeding the limits of this selection might have overcrowded my comparative data more than is plausibly comfortable and more than is relevant for the pursuit of my main topic: In Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* the myrtle (Lat. *myrtus*) is mentioned as a tree with remarkable powers for prophecy and augury; it is associated with Venus and hence used in wedding banquets; it is an ingredient in many medicinal and aromatic prescriptions; wreaths of myrtle are worn sometimes by triumphant army leaders (instead of the more customary laurel) and in many other instances, see Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, trans. J.F. Healey (London 1991), 203, 302 et passim; for Latin and Greek material concerning the myrtle, see C. Connors, 'Scent and Sensibility in Plautus' *Casina*', *The Classical Quarterly*, N.S. 47 (1997), 305–9. Much of the Hellenistic material concerning the medicinal uses of the myrtle has been absorbed into Syriac documents. A Syriac medical text, for example, enumerates scores of instances in which myrtle, or myrtle oil, has been used in recipes for various medications. See E.A. Wallis Budge (trans. and annot.), *Syrian Anatomy, Pathology and Therapeutics or The Book of Medicine* (Oxford 1913), 2 vols. (for many medicinal concoctions based on myrtle, see vol. II, Index, 774); according to Wallis Budge, this text is probably a translation into Syriac from the Greek made by a Nestorian physician in the early centuries of the Common Era. In a Coptic treatise on exorcism, the exorcist is instructed to 'wear a crown of roses, have a twig of myrtle in [his] hand, and rock salt in [his] mouth'. See F. Rossi apud E.R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman World*, Bollingen Series 37 (New York 1953–68), vol. 4, 174. For myrtle in early Jewish medicinal and cosmetic prescriptions, see F. Rosner (trans. and ed.), *Julius Preuss' Biblical and Talmudic Medicine* (New York 1978) 305 (citing BT Git. 68b) and 372 (citing BT Shab. 9). In a well-known passage from the *Hekhalot Rabbati*, when R. Nehunya ben ha-Qannah remains in a mystical trance, R. Ishma'el inserts 'a bough of myrtle full of oil...' into a 'piece of very fine woollen cloth...' which had been laid 'beside a woman who... had not yet become pure....' This piece of cloth suffused with myrtle-oil is placed 'upon the knees of R. Nehunya' in an extremely cautious operation designed to bring the sage down unharmed. See G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York 1965), 11.

dialects, *āsā*, myrtle,<sup>26</sup> is apparently a loanword from the Akkadian *asum*.<sup>27</sup> *Asum* and *āsā*, according to some, seem to share the root 's-y with words denoting healing, medicine, physician, etc.<sup>28</sup> Bearing in mind the therapeutic qualities of the myrtle, these two distinct lexemes could have been easily associated semantically. Akkadian sources attest to the use of the myrtle as an aromatic, as an ingredient in perfume for ritual offerings and in medical as well as magical use since the dawn of civilization.<sup>29</sup> Arabic, too, has assimilated this cultural loanword and the medical knowledge associated with it, probably via Aramaic.<sup>30</sup> Some classical Arabic dictionaries show awareness

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. BT R. ha-Sh. 23a, in a list of plants in both Aramaic and Hebrew: *hādas*, *āsā*.

<sup>27</sup> See D. Testen, 'Semitic Terms for "MYRTLE": A Study in Covert Cognates', *JNES* 57 (1998), 281; also M. Levey, *Early Arabic Pharmacology: An Introduction based on Ancient and Medieval Sources* (Leiden 1973), 64.

<sup>28</sup> *Asû*, according to *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, means 'physician', and *asûtu* denotes 'medical practice, medical treatment, and medical lore'. See vol. A/2, 344, 351 respectively; for Syriac, see e.g. J. Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, (Oxford 1903) 22b s.v. 's-'; also M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon* (Piscataway, NJ 2009) 72a s.v. 's-y. Note, however Widengren's reservation of the connection of *āsa* with words denoting healing. See G. Widengren, 'Review of Drower's *Water into Wine* London 1956', *JSS* 2 (1957), 417–22; cf. Testen's above mentioned article, which suggests a different etymology, according to which *ās* and *hādas* may derive from a common origin; thus, in some Yemeni Arabic dialects (both ancient and modern), myrtle is known as *hadas* or *adas*.

<sup>29</sup> For the use of myrtle in ancient Mesopotamia as an ingredient for perfume in ritual offerings, see the Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (XI, 160[!]) apud *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* (Chicago 1968), vol. A/2, 342ff; A. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (Oxford 2003), vol. 1, 712–13. The collection of plants placed by Ūta-napišti in the ritual fire after the Deluge — reed, cedar, and myrtle — is similar to the ingredients in a concoction prepared for magic rituals as inscribed on an Aramaic magic bowl from Mesopotamia — see J. Naveh and Sh. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem and Leiden 1985): bowl 13, 200 (12), 202 (17), 212 (15) and note the reference to PT Suk. III; cf. also E.M. Yamauchi, *Mandaic Incantation Texts* (New Haven 1967), 204 (text 15, 5).

<sup>30</sup> In some Arabic-speaking areas myrtle is known also as *rayḥān* or as *marsīn* (from the Greek *myrsinē*) — see F. Rosner (ed. and trans.), *Moses Maimonides' Glossary of Drug Names* (Philadelphia 1979), 11; cf. W. Schmucker, *Die pflanzliche und mineralische Materia Medica in Firdaus al-Hikma des Ṭabarī* (Bonn 1969), 61, no. 19: *ās* (= Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Sahl Rabban al-Ṭabarī, *Firdaus al-Hikma*, 382.4). For the plethora of therapeutic uses of the myrtle in Islamic medicine, see the many occurrences of *ās*, *dihn al-ās* (myrtle oil), *habb al-ās* (myrtle seed), *mā' al-ās* (myrtle water) in Ibn Sīnā, *al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb* (Beirut 1987), vol. IV (the index) 89 (s.v. *ās*). See also M. Levey, op. cit., 6, 64, and 76. This material should be viewed vis-à-vis the Syriac *Book of Medicine* mentioned above, see note 25.

of the foreign origin of this word, yet approve of its employment in eloquent poetry. These dictionaries (which, incidentally, derive *ās* from the root *ʿ-w-s*) mention its sweet scent and its evergreenness.<sup>31</sup> In Umm ‘Abd Allāh’s dream the myrtle’s evergreenness is presented as an essential symbolic feature. Indeed, it represents an abiding vitality which belongs to a special type of human beings, those who are divinely endowed, the holy men. Such a presentation of the myrtle can be found in testimonies from various religious and cultural sources. For example, the evergreen myrtle comes up in an intricate alchemical treatise ascribed to Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, an enigmatic personality supposedly of the second/eighth-century, under whose name a huge alchemical corpus in Arabic is in existence.<sup>32</sup> The treatise in question is titled *Kitāb al-Zi’baq al-gharbī*, The Occidental Mercury. Its style is vague and couched with enigmas (or perhaps with errors of scribes and redactors?). But the role of the myrtle in an alchemical distillation process comes through clearly enough. The myrtle’s evergreenness, which is unaffected by temporal changes of cold or warm, symbolizes, esoterically, the ever-present purifying and transformative element sought after by alchemists and philosophers.<sup>33</sup> What is of particular interest is the author’s stipulation that his description should not be taken at face value; the secret meaning of the evergreen myrtle should be explored along with the code names that it had been

<sup>31</sup> See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘arab* (Beirut 1375/1956), vol. 6, 19; also al-Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-‘arūs* (Kuwait 1395/1975), vol. 15, 425f and the sources cited there. These two dictionaries often rely on the third/ninth-century lexicographer Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawarī (d. 282/895). See his *Kitāb al-Nabāt*, ed. B. Lewin (Uppsala and Wiesbaden 1953) 25f. For *asā* [!] in the canonical Ḥadīth collections, see A.J. Wensinck, *Concordance*, vol. I, 132.

<sup>32</sup> For the most up-to-date synthesis of the extant information and speculations about Jābir and alchemy in early Islam, see Pierre Lory, *Alchimie et mystique en terre d’islam* (Lagrasse 1989), 9–27 and the exhaustive bibliography in the endnotes.

<sup>33</sup> For the Arabic text, see Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, ‘Le Livre du Mercure oriental, occidental, et du feu de la pierre’ in M. Berthelot, *La Chimie au Moyen âge* (Paris 1893), vol. III (L’Alchimie Arabe), 190, 15f.:

...قطره بقضيب الآس حتى يصفر (يصفو؟) أو يكون خالصا، وليس الآس ... هو الآس الذي تظنه... وفي ذلك... إيضاح أمر الآس الذي سمته مارية سلايم الذهب وسماه سقراط (?) الطائر الأخضر وسماه الناس من الحكماء بكل اسم وكل لقب ضنا به وصيانة له... فلنقل أولا لم سموه آسا فأقول لهم سموه بذلك لخضرته وطول مكثهم (!) مع اختلاف الأزمان من الحر والبرد عليه  
سوا...

For the French translation, see *ibid.*, 212–16 and especially 214f. Cf. P. Kraus, *Jabir ibn Hayyan, contribution à l’histoire des idées scientifiques dans l’Islam* (Cairo 1942), vol. II, 9, 13.

given protectively by legendary sages associated with the alchemical art: 'the golden ladders' (*salālīm al-dhahab*) by Maria the Egyptian and 'the green bird' (*al-ṭā'ir al-akhḍar*) by Socrates [!].<sup>34</sup> Another example comes from a rather late Judaic Midrash, *Pānīm āḥērīm*, dated either to the early (eighth century) or the late (twelfth–thirteenth century) Middle Ages. We find in it the following statement: 'As the myrtle withers neither in summer nor in winter, so also the righteous withers neither in this world nor in the world-to-come'.<sup>35</sup>

Now, symbolic meanings are often conveyed in formal, ritualistic acts. The dream we are studying evokes such acts: sitting at a source of fresh pure water, the meeting with an unknown messenger at the source of the water, the white clothes and headgear the messenger is wearing, and in particular his holding of the two kinds of plants in his hands. It is worth repeating here the phrasing of the dreamer:

Then I saw in his right hand [a bunch] of young green myrtle [twigs] (*ās akhḍar raṭb*) and in his other hand two branches of sweet basil (*rayāḥīn*). While he was talking to me he was holding them in his hands.

That the myrtle should be held in the right hand is ritualistically significant. In Judaism, one of the central rituals of the feast of Tabernacle includes holding up the 'four species' — i.e. citron, myrtle, palm and willow.<sup>36</sup> According to tradition, every day during the celebration of the feast the 'four species' are held and raised up: in the right hand one should hold, bundled together in a very specific way, the myrtle twigs, the palm branch and the willow twigs, and in the left hand the citron on its own.<sup>37</sup> According to *Midrash Tēhillīm*, another medieval Midrashic compilation, the reason for this ritual is to be sought in Ps. 17:11: 'Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy

<sup>34</sup> On Maria, variably known as the Jewess or the Egyptian, see F. Sezgin, *GAS*, vol. IV: *Alchimie-Chemie, Botanik-Agrikultur bis ca. 430H* (Leiden 1996), 70–3. For the 'green bird', cf. another dream of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's wife, see Radtke and O'Kane, 'The Autobiography of al-Tirmidhī' in *The Concept of Sainthood*, 26–7.

<sup>35</sup> See Midrash *Pānīm āḥērīm* in S. Buber (ed.), *Sammlung Agadischer Commentare zum Buche Ester* (Vilna 1886), 63 (version II, parasha 2: 79–82); also L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia 1968), vol. IV, 383–4.

<sup>36</sup> See Lev. 23:40; BT Suk. 12a, 32b–33a, 45a.

<sup>37</sup> For holding the three plants bundle (named collectively *lūlāb*) in the right hand, see BT Suk. 37b: 'And Rabba said: the *lūlāb* (i.e. the palm branch bundle) one holds in the right hand and the citron in the left' — I thank Dr Melila Eshed-Hellner for this reference; see also Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilēkōt lūlāb*, ch. 7 §6 (English translation S. Gandz and H. Klein, *The Code of Maimonides* [New Haven 1961], Book III, 397).

presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore'. Since the triple bundle which includes the myrtle symbolizes the endless pleasures at God's *right hand*, it is in this hand that it should ritually be held.<sup>38</sup> Interesting in this context is a Talmudic anecdote, which, in a somewhat idiosyncratic ritual, connects the myrtle with Shabbat and possibly with the efficacious aspect of holding up the myrtle: on the eve of Shabbat, R. Shimon bar-Yohai and his son saw an old man running. He was holding two bunches of myrtle twigs in his hands. When they asked him what these were for, he answered: 'One is for "Remember!" (*zākôr* – Exod. 20:8), the other for "Observe!" (*šāmôr* – Deut. 5:12).'<sup>39</sup>

Another ritualistic example comes from a time and milieu closer to the dreamer at the core of our inquiry: it is in the context of traditions concerning Muḥammad ibn Nuṣayr, the third/ninth-century eponymous founder of the Nuṣayriyya (one of the extremist, *ghulāt*, sects that branched off from the Shī'a). In the Nuṣayri tradition, Ibn Nuṣayr is considered the *bāb* (literally, the Gate, the title of the Imām's mouthpiece who acts as intermediary between the Imām and his followers) of the eleventh Shī'i Imām, Ḥasan al-'Askarī (d. 260/874). It is related that when a delegation of Persian horsemen paid a visit to the Imām, 'they found him dressed all in green, surrounded by green mats and pillows, and next to him Ibn Nuṣayr, also clad in green and holding a branch of myrtle (*ās*) in his hand'.<sup>40</sup> Although the tradition does not specify in which hand the myrtle was held, it is obvious that it was the right hand, since the left hand is considered ill-omened and foreboding and is at best referred to, euphemistically, as 'the other hand' as in the dream narrative we are discussing (see above). The image of an Imām accompanied by his *bāb* (in the Nuṣayri tradition both figures were believed to be divinely inspired and endowed with super-human qualities; furthermore, the Imām was considered as God incarnate), the latter holding myrtle in his hand and both seated in the centre of a formal audition

<sup>38</sup> See *Midrash Tēhillim*, ed. S. Buber (Jerusalem 1966), 128–9 (Psalm 17).

<sup>39</sup> See BT Shab. 33b. Prof. Yehudah Liebes, to whom I am indebted for this reference, has suggested that this anecdote may allude to the efficacious qualities which the myrtle supposedly possesses. For the use of myrtle in magical recipes, see above note 30.

<sup>40</sup> See M.M. Bar-Asher and A. Kofsky, 'Dogma and Ritual in *Kitāb al-ma'ārif* by the Nuṣayri theologian Abū Sa'id Maymūn b. Al-Qāsim al-Ṭabarānī (d. 426/1034–5)', *Arabica* 52 (2005), 55. For the myrtle in Nuṣayri ceremonies, see *ibid.*, note no. 72 and note the sources cited there and the reference to the Man-daeans. I am grateful to Prof. Bar-Asher for this reference.

in which a delegation of horsemen present themselves to offer their loyalty and submission to both, such an image is reminiscent of pre-Islamic Near-Eastern traditions with similar iconic and ritualistic connotations. The most striking similarity is with the Mandaean tradition.

In spite of well-known difficulties in charting the history and in dating the origin of the Mandaean tradition with any precision, the following statement made by one of the leading experts seems to be generally accepted: 'Modern investigations ... have shown that the [Mandaean] liturgical and poetic writings must have existed already in the third century CE'.<sup>41</sup> Also agreed upon is the association of the Mandaean religion with late antique Gnosticism. This, for one thing, is reflected in the (Aramaic) word *manda*, gnosis (knowledge), from which their designation derives. In fact, the Mandaean religion of today is said to be the only living remnant of the Gnostic religions of Late Antiquity.<sup>42</sup> Some of the ritual images in the dream we are contemplating can be found also in the Mandaean tradition and are central to it: water and the purification ritual of baptism in water (*maṣbūta*); the presence and help of divine messengers ('*uthria*');<sup>43</sup> the right hand significance, for example in the 'right hand clasping'

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. K. Rudolph, 'The Relevance of Mandaean Literature for the Study of Near Eastern Religions', *ARAM* 16 (2004), 2; see also idem, *Mandaicism*, 3ff.; also J. Bergman et al. (eds), *Gnostica – Mandaica – Liturgica: Opera eius ipsius selecta & collecta septuagenario Erico Segelberg oblata* (Uppsala 1990), 119ff.; also J.J. Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford 2002); also C.G. Häberl, 'Mandaicism in Antiquity and the Antiquity of Mandaicism', *Religion Compass*, 6/5 (2012), 262–76.

<sup>42</sup> For the Mandaeans in the modern period, see E.S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore*<sup>2</sup> (Piscataway, NJ 2002); on the persecution of the Mandaean minority in Iraq and Iran today, follow the website of the Society for Persecuted Peoples (*Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker*): [www.gfbv.de](http://www.gfbv.de); note also *The Mandaean (Al-Mandā'iyya)*, a current magazine published by The Mandaean Association UK) with thanks to Dr Sabah Malallah, chief editor of this publication.

<sup>43</sup> For the divine messengers, or light beings named '*uthria*' (sing. '*uthra*'), who arrive from the realm of the Great Life (about which see below, note 46) and are personified in rituals by the priests, see Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 94: '*uthria* and *malkia*... are semi-divinities who carry the will of the Great Life', and see also Index, 433; note in particular prayers nos. 107 and 118 in *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (translated by E.S. Drower, Leiden 1959): 'In the Name of the Great Life! My good messenger of light who travellet to the house of its friends, come, direct my speech and open my mouth in praise that I may praise the Great Life wholly'.

ceremony (*qushṭa*);<sup>44</sup> the white dress and turban worn by priests and laity (*rāsta*); and, lastly, the evergreen, fresh and fine-smelling myrtle. In the Mandaean liturgy the myrtle appears to be much more than yet another ingredient in triumphal wreaths, in therapeutic recipes or in magical formulae. Myrtle is a cardinal ritualistic object endowed with sanctity and symbolism. Here, for example, are some lines from a hymn which is recited during one of the main Mandaean ceremonies, the *Zidqa brīkha* ('the blessed offering'), at which the high priest distributes myrtle twigs to the participants and they in turn insert them into their turbans:<sup>45</sup>

In the Name of the Great Life!<sup>46</sup>  
 Myrtle, Myrtle! The King<sup>47</sup> took it,  
 The King was surrounded by the perfumed myrtle  
 And he blessed Hibil-Ziwa<sup>48</sup> and said to him:  
 Blessed are thou, our father Hibil-Ziwa  
 Like the myrtle that is in thy right hand.<sup>49</sup>  
 And may thy root flourish  
 Like the root of the fresh myrtle  
 And thou shalt have glory and honour  
 Like the Water of Life.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> For the significance of the right hand in Mandaism, see E.S. Drower, *The Secret Adam: A Study of Nasoraean Gnosis* (Oxford 1960) 6, 13, 19; also *The Canonical Prayerbook*, 61 and note p. 309, hymn 383.

<sup>45</sup> See E.S. Drower, *The Haran Gawaita and the Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa* (Vatican 1953), 62, note 1; also eadem, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 140–2, 205–9; *The Canonical Prayerbook*, 240ff.

<sup>46</sup> 'The Great Life' (*ḥiia rbia*) refers to the Lord of the heavenly realm of light which the Mandeans worship; for the intriguing expression *al-ḥayāt al-ʿuḡmā*, the greatest life, used uniquely (?) by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, see *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, 425 (ch. 290): *ʿfaʿl-ḥayātu ʿl-ʿuḡmā ḥiya ḥayātu ʿl-ḥayyi ʿlladhī lā yamūtu* — 'the greatest life is the life of the Living one who will not die'.

<sup>47</sup> King, *malka*, is a Mandaean title for a light-being and can also refer to the priest who performs the ritual. See, e.g., K. Rudolph, *Mandaeism* (Leiden 1978), 2; Drower, *The Secret Adam*, 56 and 101 note 3; see also above, note 43. The image of the 'king' standing among his 'men' in a ritualistic assembly at which the myrtle bears a distinctive role is strikingly reminiscent of the Nuṣayri description cited above, as well as of the biblical image from the prophetic visions of Zechariah (Zech. 1:8) which will follow. See above, p. 477.

<sup>48</sup> Hibil Ziwa, literally Abel of Light, one of the Adamite 'light messengers'; on him see e.g. K. Rudolph, 'The Mandaean Religion', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*; also H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston 1958), 74, 99, 121.

<sup>49</sup> For the significance of the right hand, see above, pp. 476–7.

<sup>50</sup> Although in Arabic literature in general and in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's writings in particular the idiom 'water of life', *māʾ al-ḥayāt*, is much more prevalent than *al-ḥayāt al-ʿuḡmā* = the greatest life (see note 46), its association with the heavenly

Many more passages of this ilk could be cited to impress upon us the centrality of the myrtle in the Mandaean rites. Lady E.S. Drower, an early twentieth-century anthropologist, is probably the first modern scholar to have assiduously observed, collected and recorded the rites and liturgy of the modern Mandaeans, whom she had met in the marshes of south Iraq and Iran. In her works Drower has given vivid descriptions of the myrtle wreath (*klīla*) which is present in many acts of worship and of other ceremonies and hymns in which the myrtle plays an important religious role.<sup>51</sup> Of particular interest is the *drabsha/drafsha*, the ritual banner present at almost every Mandaean ceremony, into which fresh myrtle sprigs are woven.<sup>52</sup> As is clear from the liturgy, including the hymn cited above, the sacral objects involved in these ceremonies are believed to represent their spiritual counterparts in the Realm of Light and Life.<sup>53</sup> This brings to mind the symbolic connotations of the evergreen myrtle in the alchemical art adopted by Jābir ibn Ḥayyān and others in early Islam, connotations that were kept concealed from lay people but were considered attainable, fathomed and acted upon by an elect few.<sup>54</sup>

life as, for example, in *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, ch. 284, 410ff, is noteworthy; see, for example, *ibid.*, 412: 'The otherworldly life inheres in everything in him; everything in him is alive from head to toe; each hair and each nail is alive by his life — that is, if they [!] have drunk the *water of life* in the gate of paradise' (*wa-ḥayātu 'l-ākhirati fī kulli shay'in minhu, fa-kullu shay'in minhu ḥayyun min qarnihi ilā qadamihī, kullu sha'ratin wa-kullu zifrin ḥayyun bi-ḥayātihi, wa-dhālika idhā sharibū mā'a 'l-ḥayāti bi-bābi 'l-jannati*).

<sup>51</sup> Of special interest are the references to the myrtle in E.S. Drower's, *The Secret Adam*; see, for example, 87, note 2: 'The omission of myrtle and the myrtle wreath is a sin, which... needs purification by baptism... and soon'; see also eadem, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 206: '...[the] drinking of fresh juice and water is combined throughout with myrtle rites and the formal "smelling the perfume of the myrtle", hereby intensifying... the implied symbolism of evergreen immortality and of the resurrection forces of spring, germination, and growth...'; for more on the myrtle wreath, see below note 54.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 108ff, 115 et passim; also eadem, *The Secret Adam*, 61ff.; see also K. Rudolph, 'Interaction with the Iranian Religion', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

<sup>53</sup> See Rudolph, *Mandaeism*, 6f. It is worth noting that in the last decades the study of Mandaeism has been flourishing in several academic centres. Here I shall confine myself to mentioning two conferences held by the ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies: the 13<sup>th</sup> international conference, *The Mandaeans*, held at Harvard University. See the proceedings in *ARAM* 11/2 (1999) then in July 2013 in Oxford. Following this last conference, a Society for Mandaean Studies has been established. See e.g. <<http://cfis.columbia.edu/event/society-mandaean-studies>>.

<sup>54</sup> An intriguing, hard to overlook parallel to ancient rituals connected with the myrtle appears in a passage of *The Acts of Thomas*, ch. 5, which reads as follows:

*Myrtle as a Symbol of the Holy Man*

In our pursuit of myrtle imagery in the context of ‘holiness,’ we arrive at a biblical passage whose similarity to Umm ‘Abd Allāh’s dream is nothing but striking. The passage in question is the first night vision of the prophet Zechariah, seen in the second year of the reign of Darius. Several images in the night vision seem relevant for our discussion, but what is of particular relevance are the rabbinic commentaries thereof. Zech. 1:8–11 reads as follows:

I saw by night, and behold, a man riding upon a red horse, *and he stood among the myrtle trees* that were in the bottom; and behind him there were red horses, speckled, and white. Then said I, O, my Lord, what are these? And the angel that talked with me said unto me, I will show thee what these be. And the man that stood *among the myrtle trees* answered and said, These are they whom the Lord hath sent *to walk to and fro through the earth*. And they answered the angel of the Lord that stood *among the myrtle trees* and said, *We have walked to and fro through the earth*, and behold, all the earth sitteth still and is at rest.

Two chords in this night vision reverberate in Umm ‘Abd Allāh’s dream: first, the myrtle (in the biblical Hebrew *hādassîm*, ‘myrtle’ in the plural, with no apparent suggestion of ‘trees’ as in the English translation; note, however, the Aramaic translation, below, p. 483) and, second, the expression *to walk to and fro through the earth*, an expression which marks the horses’ function and identity in the vision. The nexus of these two images in both vision and dream is striking; it allows us to characterize both the ‘horses’ and the figure in the dream as belonging to a category of messengers whose business is to walk about (or roam), investigate, and then act upon their finds: in the vision this entails reporting to a superior being and in the dream signalling out the elect from ordinary worshippers, this too, no doubt, by divine order (see above). When we add to this nexus the puzzled questions with which both the prophet Zechariah (‘what are these?’) and Umm ‘Abd Allāh (‘would you, please, tell me who you are?’) address their well-informed interlocutors, we can identify here a literary topos in a very particular context. The context in both narratives is an event which brings together the transcendent and the

‘The apostle anointed the top of his head and smeared a little upon his nostrils... and the wreath that was brought to him woven of myrtle and other flowers [in the Syriac: *klilā d-āsā*], he took and set it on his head, and took a branch of calamus and held it in his hand’, English translation from the Greek with reference to the Syriac texts, M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford 1924).

worldly realms by means of messengers. These events are visually constructed as meetings between an innocent observer and an all-knowing interlocutor. In both meetings the myrtle plays a pivotal though enigmatic role which begs interpretation. In Umm 'Abd Allāh's dream the interpretation is given to her by the angelic figure: 'And these myrtle twigs we place upon the hearts of the eminently just ones (*al-ṣiddiqūn*) and the ones who possess certitude (*al-mūqinūn*) so that by them they may know what sincerity (*ṣidq*) is'. For the interpretation of the myrtle in Zechariah's vision we have to look for illumination outside of the biblical text. We find it, for example, in the Babylonian Talmud San. 93a, in the context of a discussion concerning the ranks of the righteous (*ṣaddiqīm*).<sup>55</sup> The Talmudic discussion starts with the statement, 'The righteous are greater than the ministering angels',<sup>56</sup> which is supported by an allusion to Ḥananiah, Misha'el and 'Azariah, the three righteous youths who were thrown into the furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar but came out unscathed (Dan. 3:24–6). When God remembers His righteous, the sages suggest, He is appeased and puts off His plan to destroy the whole world.<sup>57</sup> The Rabbinic discussion that follows, with the righteous in mind, sparks off R. Yoḥanan, a third-century Palestinian Amora (Talmudic scholar),<sup>58</sup> to engage in a lengthy discourse, in which he offers a commentary on Zechariah's vision: 'A man riding upon a red horse' he interprets as 'the Holy one blessed be He', and 'He stood among the myrtle trees that were in the deep' — these, he says, are 'the righteous that were in Babylon', namely, Ḥananiah, Misha'el and 'Azariah, thanks to whom the world still exists; for, he adds emphatically, 'the myrtle refers to nothing but the righteous' (*wē-ʿēn ḥādassīm ʿellā ṣaddiqīm*). This Rabbinic tradition according to which the myrtle represents the righteous is witnessed by the fourth-fifth-century Church Father St Jerome who, in his commentary to Zechariah,

<sup>55</sup> The linguistic and semantic affinity of the Talmudic *ṣaddiqīm* and the Islamic *ṣiddiqūn* is obvious. For further discussion, see below, p. 485.

<sup>56</sup> For the idea that certain human beings (i.e. prophets and righteous) are superior to angels, see e.g. al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb Adab al-naḥs*, eds Arberry and Abdel Qader (Cairo 1366/1947), 92: 'Then [God] created Adam, Peace be on him, and made him his choicest (*iṣṭafāhu*) and most excellent of His creation (*badīʿ fiṭratihī*) and He made the angels prostrate before him (*wa-asjada lahu malāʾikatahu*)'.

<sup>57</sup> This, obviously, is connected with the tradition of a (fixed) number of righteous who must be present in every generation for the world to subsist. For a comparative discussion, see below, pp. 485–7.

<sup>58</sup> On R. Yoḥanan b. Nappāḥa, one of the most eminent third-century Palestinian Sages (d. 279), see A. Hyman, *Toldoth Tannaim veʿAmoraim* (Jerusalem 1964), vol. II, 653–72 (in Hebrew).

which is assumed to reflect the Aramaic Targum, writes: 'The Hebrews... wish the myrtles to be understood as the prophets and holy ones who were dwelling in the midst of the captive people and were in the deep...'.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the 'addendum' (*tosefta*) to the Aramaic Targum of Zech. 1:8 has this in brackets: 'I had a vision during the night. Behold, I saw a man mounted on a red horse, and he was stationed among the myrtle trees of Babylon <among the righteous who were in the Diaspora in Babylon>'.<sup>60</sup>

In the same vein, the Talmudic lore connects this imagery of the myrtle (*hādas*) also with Esther, whose Hebrew name Hadassah derives from *hādas*. This is brought to bear by R. Yoḥanan in the passage referred to above (from San. 93a), when he illustrates his exegesis of Zechariah's vision with a reference to the Book of Esth. 2:7: 'And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther...' R. Yoḥanan's elliptic reference to Esther-Hadassah in the context of the myrtle as the righteous is clarified by BT Meg. 13:1: 'R. Meir says: Her name is Esther, so why is she called Hadassah? [She is thus called] after the righteous who were named *hādassīm* (myrtle), as it is said [in Zech. 1:8]: "And He stood among the *hādassīm*"'.<sup>61</sup>

In the Rabbinic lore, Zechariah's prophetic night vision of a man standing among the myrtle [trees] is thus understood as an image of God standing among His righteous. Visually, this image is evocative of the 'King' standing among his messengers (*uthria*) in the Mandaeen ceremony and the hymn cited above, where, as will be remembered, the 'King' distributes to the lofty assembly fresh myrtle. It can also be associated with the Nuṣayri image cited above describing the Imām sitting with his *bāb* among his loyal followers. That the 'righteous' stands (or sits) in the company of divine messengers, or angels, should also be borne in mind, especially when in the biblical vision the prophet's interlocutor is identified as 'the angel (or messenger) of God' (*mal'ak Ādônāy*) and when we remember that in the Talmudic exegesis, 'the righteous' come up in discussing *ṣaddiqīm* versus

<sup>59</sup> See R. Hayward, 'Saint Jerome and the Aramaic Targumim', *JSS* 32 (1987), 105–23, and, in particular, 107ff.

<sup>60</sup> See *Targum Jonathan to Zechariah* in A. Sperber (ed.), *The Bible in Aramaic*, 4 vols. (Leiden 1959–73), vol. 3, 477; see also R. Kasher, *Targumic Toseftot to the Prophets* (Jerusalem 1996), 213, 280 (in Hebrew/Aramaic).

<sup>61</sup> See the Aramaic Targum to Esth. 2:7 in A. Sperber (ed.), *The Bible in Aramaic*, vol. IVa: *The Hagiographa. Transition from Translation to Midrash* (Leiden 1968), 184–5; also *Midrash Tēhillim*, ed. Buber, Psalm 22 §3, 181: 'Esther was named Hadassah ... due to her righteousness'; also *Midrash Pānim Āḥērīm*, ed. Buber, version II, parasha 2: 79–82, p. 63.

'angels.' Culturally and historically, then, Biblical, Rabbinic, and Islamic, and to some extent also Christian references, supported by the Mandaean material, imply a clear and continuous association of the myrtle with the 'righteous' — this distinguished category of human beings which, from a comparative perspective, we may name also 'holy men' or 'saints' as a wide-spread late antique cultural feature.

The crisscrossing net of traditions from pre-Islamic Late Antiquity in which myrtle is celebrated and in whose cults myrtle is central is indeed wide. But my intention is focused not on the phenomenon of myrtle at large but on myrtle as a symbol of the 'holy man' within pre-Islamic traditions.

Before we continue, a point from the perspective of 'influence' should be reiterated: clearly, it would be difficult to pin down one corpus as the prime source of influence for the myrtle symbolism and function. As regards early Islam in particular, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to suggest from where the woman's dream images sprang forth: were they echoes of Zoroastrian, Mandaean or perhaps Jewish traditions? At the same time, I am not inclined to regard this symbolism as simply 'archetypal.' It seems so deeply embedded in the Near-Eastern traditions of Antiquity and Late Antiquity that its presence has without doubt subsisted well into the Islamic period, surfacing into the consciousness, or the unconscious, of a third/ninth-century woman from a region that for many centuries had been known as a place where, culturally and religiously, a variety of traditions and systems converged. That this woman should be the visionary wife of the sage who, during the formative period of Islamic mysticism, laid down a special typology of 'the holy man' (*walī*), and that this typology should lie at the foundation of the teaching of *wilāya* in Islamic mysticism at large, make this inquiry significant from comparative and historical perspectives rather than from phenomenological or archetypal perspectives alone. In other words, what surfaced into the dreamer's consciousness were not simply images from the so-called 'collective unconscious', to use the terminology of analytical psychology, but rather images which have been implanted there through multi-layered (conscious or unconscious) cultural contacts over a long period of time. By this observation I do not mean to reduce the numinous quality of the dream. It is my understanding that, on the personal level, this and the rest of the dreams in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's autobiography were understood by both himself and his wife as 'teaching dreams', messages delivered by a transcendent messenger from a divine sphere, perhaps in lieu of a living, flesh and

blood teacher that Abū 'Abd Allāh never had.<sup>62</sup> It was clear to both husband and wife that the purpose of these messages was to announce that they were among the chosen ones, the elect, those included in the category of *awliyā' allāh*.

### The World Cannot Exist Without the Righteous

The Talmudic commentary identifying Zechariah's myrtle [trees] with the righteous (*ṣaddiqīm*) sprang from R. Yoḥanan's recall of the three righteous youths who were in the furnace in Babylon under the protection of God and God's angel. But the Amora's interpretative association went further: the 'man' in the night vision, he says, represents God, and the 'red horse' upon which He was riding represents God's wish to turn the whole world to blood. Then, when God encounters His three righteous youths, He is appeased and changes His mind; consequently, the world is not destroyed. The doctrine, according to which the subsistence of the world hangs upon the presence of the righteous in it is well-known in Rabbinic lore and prevalent in numerous discussions scattered in the Talmud and in the Midrashic literature.<sup>63</sup> In BT Yoma 38b, for example, several sayings concerning the categorical unceasing presence of the *ṣaddiqīm* in each and every generation are attributed to the same Amora mentioned above, R. Yoḥanan.<sup>64</sup> In the course of Yoma 38b, it is R. Yoḥanan who articulates the following well-known saying: 'The world exists even for the sake of one righteous, as it is said' [Prov. 10:25]: 'And the *ṣaddiq* is the foundation of the world'.<sup>65</sup> In times of calamity,

<sup>62</sup> For a fuller elaboration, see S. Svir, 'Dreaming Analyzed and Recorded'; see also above, p. 468.

<sup>63</sup> For a thematic survey, see E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, (Jerusalem 1975) 487ff. and note Urbach's assessment that this concept 'became the accepted view of the Palestinian Amoraim in the second half of the fourth century' (489–90). For a discussion on myrtle as symbol of the righteous, see R. Mach, *Der Zaddik in Talmud und Midrasch* (Leiden 1957) 103–4, note 8.

<sup>64</sup> R. Yoḥanan said: 'A righteous does not pass away from this world before a righteous like he is created'; also: 'The Blessed Be He saw that the righteous are but few, so He planted them [!] in every generation'. One wonders whether, when choosing the verb 'plant' (*šēṭālān*), R. Yoḥanan has in mind the image of the myrtle upon which he has elaborated in the passage from San. 93a. See above, p. 482.

<sup>65</sup> For an in-depth analysis of concepts and sources associated with this saying and verse, see Y. Liebes, 'Ha-māšīah šel ha-Zōhar', in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought, Publications of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities: a Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem, December 1977*

when God in His wrath wishes to punish the iniquities of the evil-doers by destroying the world, the presence of the righteous is indispensable. The prototype and model for this virtuous and life-preserving righteous is Abraham, who, in arguing with God against God's decision to destroy the sinning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:13), succeeded in laying down a binding protective precedent that hinges on the ubiquitous presence of a number of men representing the loftiest human exempla. Hence the Talmudic dictum: 'The world cannot exist with less than thirty righteous [who are] like Abraham our Father...' <sup>66</sup>

The principle that maintains a necessary and binding correlation between the well-being of the world and the presence of a number of holy men in it, anchored in late antique Rabbinic Judaism, is widespread also in early Islamic sources. One of the earliest collections of traditions concerning the holy men in Islam is *Kitāb al-Awliyā'* (The Book of the Friends of God) by Abū Bakr ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894), <sup>67</sup> a prolific author and court educator from Baghdad and a near-contemporary of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī. He cites the following tradition with a chain of transmission (*isnād*) that ends with Ka'b al-Aḥbār, a first/seventh-century Jewish convert to Islam. <sup>68</sup> It says: 'After Noah's generation (lit.: people), there never came upon the earth a generation without there being in it fourteen [men] thanks to whom [Divine] punishment is lifted'. <sup>69</sup> Noah is only one

(Jerusalem 1982), 118 ff. (in Hebrew); English translation A. Schwartz, S. Nakache and P. Peli, 'The Messiah of the Zohar', in Y. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany 1993), 12 ff.

<sup>66</sup> See PT 'A.Z., 9a, section II: 1 (English translation J. Neusner in *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation* [Chicago 1982], vol. 33, 53); also *Bereschit Rabba* vol. 1: 330 (ch. 35, 2) and vol. 2: 501–2 (ch. 49, 3; English translation in *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, vol. 1: 283, 423); cf. *Cant. Rabba* 7, 8 (English translation M. Simon in *Midrash Rabbah: Song of Songs* [London and New York 1983], vol. 9: 294–5); BT Suk. 45b, San. 97b (English translation I. Epstein in *The Babylonian Talmud* [London 1938], vol. 8: 209–10 and vol. 24: 659–60).

<sup>67</sup> On him see A. Dietrich, *EI*<sup>2</sup> s.v.

<sup>68</sup> See on him M. Schmitz, *EI*<sup>2</sup> s.v.

<sup>69</sup> See Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Awliyā'* (Beirut 1413/1993) 28, no. 61: 'mā atā 'alā 'l-ardī qawmun ba'da qawmi Nūḥin illā wa-fihā arba'ata 'ashara yudfā'u bihimu 'l-'adhābu'. The adjacent tradition in *Kitāb al-Awliyā'* (no. 62), reported in the name of Ibn 'Abbās, one of the most eminent companions of the Prophet Muḥammad, argues that the required number is five, not fourteen. Al-Suyūṭī, a ninth/fifteenth-century author (d. 911/1505), brings the following variant: 'After Noah the earth has never been devoid of seven [men] due to whom God defends the people of the earth'. See 'al-Khabar al-dāll 'alā wujūd al-qutb wa'l-awṭād

representative of the line of righteous thanks to whom divine wrath is warded off. In the Islamic lore, the analogy with Abraham is crucial and is found in many early traditions concerning the holy men. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, in his voluminous compendium *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, dedicated a chapter to the description of the *abdāl*, a fixed-number category of godly men who make up an unbroken succession by which the world is preserved against destruction.<sup>70</sup> He cites the following prophetic tradition: ‘The *abdāl* are thirty men whose hearts are in the mould of Abraham’s heart. When one man dies, God substitutes him with another’.<sup>71</sup>

The analogy between the Judaic and the Islamic traditions concerning the holy men has been dealt with in (at least) two scholarly works, in which much comparative material has been assembled.<sup>72</sup> It would be superfluous to repeat what has already been brought to bear. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s concepts on *wilāya*, too, have been previously elaborated in scholarly literature.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, rather than sum up well-known ideas in this regard, I wish to return to Umm ‘Abd Allāh’s dream in order to flesh out the distinction made by the messenger, and symbolized by the two kinds of plants he is holding, between two categories of religious personalities: the worshippers (*al-‘ubbād*) on the one hand and the *awliyā*’ on the other (see above,

*wa’l-nujabā’ wa’l-abdāl* in *al-Hāwī li’l-fatāwī* (Beirut 1403/1983) vol. 2, 241–55, 246. The numbers of the indispensable holy men varies, but the notion that the peace and well-being of the world is maintained thanks to this or that number is persistent in both the Judaic and the Islamic traditions.

<sup>70</sup> *Abdāl*, or *budalā’*, is one of the oldest terms to be found in Islamic literature which carries the connotations of ‘holy men’. See J. Chabbi, ‘Abdāl’, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 1, 173–4.

<sup>71</sup> See *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, ch. 51, 69: *al-abdālu thalāthūna rajulan qulūbuhum ‘alā qalbi Ibrāhīma, idhā māta ‘l-rajulu abdala ‘llāhu makānahu ākhara*.

<sup>72</sup> See R. Mach, *Der Zaddik in Talmud und Midrasch* (Leiden 1957); also P.B. Fenton, ‘La Hiérarchie des saints dans la mystique juive et dans la mystique islamique’, in M. Hallamish (ed.), *‘Alei Shefer. Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexander Safran* (Ramat-Gan 1990), 49–73; also idem, ‘The Hierarchy of Saints in Jewish and Islamic Mysticism’, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 10 (1991), 12–34; see also H. Schwarzbaum, ‘The Thirty-six Righteous in Jewish Folklore’, in E. Yassif (ed.), *Roots and Landscapes: Studies in Folklore* (Beer Sheva 1993), 84–95 (in Hebrew).

<sup>73</sup> See B. Radtke, ‘The Concept of *Wilāya* in Early Sufism’, in L. Lewisohn (ed.), *Classical Persian Sufism: from its Origins to Rumi* (London and New York 1993), 483–96 (= *The Heritage of Sufism, Volume I: Classical Persian Sufism from Its Origins to Rumi (700–1300)*, (Oxford 1999); M. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Cambridge 1993), esp. ch. 2, 26–46 et passim.

p. 482). When the dream image and its purport are placed alongside al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's teaching at large, it transpires that his understanding of *wilāya* reflects an analogous binary typology while also taking it further: the binary message conveyed in the dream expands in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's works to refer not only to the worshippers vis-à-vis the 'friends', but to maintain that within *wilāya* itself there inheres a deeper binary distinction between those named *ṣiddiqūn*, those who truly attain the rank of *awliyā' Allāh*, and those named *ṣādiqūn*, the just ones, who attain only the lower ranks of *wilāya*.<sup>74</sup> What constitutes the one type and what the other? The follow up of this question brings out some radical streaks in al-Tirmidhī's understanding of the man-God relationship inherent in *wilāya* and in human nature at large. Also, as in the case of the previously surveyed myrtle image, al-Tirmidhī's teaching of *wilāya* retains further echoes of late antique traditions. The traditions in question, to which I can point only in brief, are associated with (apocryphal?) Christian sources and notions and thus widen the outlook of the pre-Islamic materials which form the background for al-Tirmidhī's understanding of the 'friends of God' and, in the wake of prophecy, the special position they hold for the Muslim community and for the world at large.

### Who are the 'Free and Noble' (*al-aḥrār al-kirām*)?

In the context of the inner binary typology of the Friends of God, there is, then, one last comparative point that I wish to bring out. In *Sirat al-awliyā'*, although by no means a systematic work, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī presents a consistent binary typology of the 'friends of God' according to which the two types are distinguished not only in their behaviour and characteristics, but also in the locations divinely allotted to them on the cosmic map of *wilāya*.<sup>75</sup> Al-Tirmidhī's cosmic-hierarchical distinction is expressed by two spatial denominations: 'the place of the free and noble' (*maḥall al-aḥrār al-kirām*) vis-à-vis 'the place of the just ones' (*maḥall al-ṣādiqīn*), the first being definitively higher and nearer to God than the latter. Fundamental to this distinction is the characterization of the *ṣādiqūn* as those among the *awliyā'* who rely on voluntary efforts and strenuous ascetical activities. Al-Tirmidhī names the principle that motivates them

<sup>74</sup> See above, notes 19–20.

<sup>75</sup> See also below, note 79.

*ṣidq*, sincerity, veracity. Pietistic literature tends to esteem sincerity and voluntary efforts as meritorious, commendable features required of the faithful. But in his radical, nonconformist vision of human anthropology and psychology, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī reevaluates ‘good deeds’ (*a‘māl al-birr*) and pious efforts as activities, good in themselves but more often than not attached to the self (*al-naḥs*). Thus, among those who seek to become God’s friends and attain a lofty place in His nearness, he maintains, only a few are clean of self-regard. Such quality pertains to the inner sphere of the ‘friends’, to an inner circle into which only a few chosen ones, the truly saintly, are allowed access. The distinction which sets the *awliyā’* apart is contingent, firstly, upon primordial divine choice; and then, for the *walī’s* position in the divine scheme to be finally attained, he must be taken through an educational-experiential process supervised by God’s spiritual helpers.<sup>76</sup> What exposes the *walī’s* nature most of all is his avoidance of falsehood and pretence, even to the smallest extent. Human nature, according to al-Tirmidhī, makes this a near impossible endeavour; effortful activities based on sincerity (*ṣidq*), either in fulfilling the normative religious duties or the supererogatory practices, are always bound up with the wilful self (*naḥs*); and wilful, effortful acts always end in false pretence (*iddi‘ā’*). Ascetical means by which one struggles against any worldly or egotistic inclinations tend, in the last resort, to strengthen the will and the self. The so-called just man (*al-ṣādiq*) who walks the path of efforts (*mujāhada*, *jihād al-naḥs*), sooner or later, despite his piety, arrives at an impasse. Realizing that without efforts he cannot proceed but that by efforts he remains chained to the *naḥs*, he becomes ‘constrained’ (*muḍṭarr*). Constraint signals a dead-end for the will (*irāda*). At this point, if he is sincerely intent on relinquishing his reliance on self and efforts, he falls into a state of helplessness and need (*faqr*, *iftiqār*, *iḍṭirār*). His call out to God from this state can be nothing but sincere, without affectations. When his sincere call (*da‘wa khālīṣa*) is answered, his heart is flown in a twinkling of the eye from ‘the place of the *ṣādiqūn*’ (*maḥall al-ṣādiqīn*) to ‘the place of the free and noble’ (*maḥall al-aḥrār al-kirām*).<sup>77</sup> True *wilāya*, concludes al-Tirmidhī, is not only contingent upon a primordial divine choice, it is also an act of renunciation,

<sup>76</sup> See e.g. *Sīrat al-awliyā’*, 94 §121; 97 §125; 99–100 §128 (= Radtke and O’Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood*, 170, 173, 175–6).

<sup>77</sup> See *Sīrat al-awliyā’* 16 §32: *fa-lammā ujibat li-hādihā ‘l-muḍṭarri da‘watuhu ʿīra bi-qalbihi min maḥalli ‘l-ṣādiqīna fī tarfati ‘aynin ilā maḥalli ‘l-aḥrārī ‘l-kirāmī*; for the *ṣādiqūn* as distinguished from the *ṣiddiqūn*, see above, note 20.

not necessarily of the world and its assets, but of the reliance on the personal ability to achieve it. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī finds scriptural proof for his challenging attitude by juxtaposing two Quranic verses: ‘make a true effort for God’ (22:78) and ‘those who make an effort for Us, we shall surely guide them to Our paths’ (29:69). Logically, the two verses seem causally connected: if you strive, then God will guide you. But al-Tirmidhī’s understanding is dictated by a *linguistic* sensibility, which construes the verbal form *la-nahdiyyannahum*, ‘We shall surely guide them’, as intrinsically associated, through the root *h-d-y*, with the word *hadiyya*, gift.<sup>78</sup> To him, the two verses confirm the typology according to which the effort-making *awliyā*, the *ṣādiqūn*, are not on a par with the *ṣiddīqūn*, those who are given divine guidance as a gift and grace.<sup>79</sup> The latter are variously designated. One of their designations is *majdhūbūn*, those who are ‘drawn-up’ to God’s nearness through God’s will, not through their own.<sup>80</sup> They are also named *ṣiddīqūn*, *awliyā*’ *Allāh* and *aḥrār kirām*, free and noble.

What does the designation ‘free and noble’ and the expression ‘the place of the free and noble’ mean?<sup>81</sup> Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī provides a clue to these questions in another of his major opera, the *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, a large compendium of ‘rare’ (or ‘precious’) traditions. In chapter 67 he cites a prophetic tradition: ‘God created Adam from a handful of soil which He took from the whole earth. Human beings emerge, therefore, according to the state of the soil... This is whence the even-tempered and the rough, the wicked and the well-disposed

<sup>78</sup> For a fuller, more complex, analysis of the semantics of the root *h-d-y*, see *Sīrat al-awliyā*, 16 §31.

<sup>79</sup> For the distinction al-Tirmidhī makes in this respect between *bayt al-‘izza* (the House of Power), the place reached by the *ṣādiqūn*, and *al-bayt al-ma’mūr* (the Inhabited House), the place reached by the *ṣiddīqūn* (also referred to as *aḥrār kirām*), a distinction laden with cosmological and theological allusions, see *Sīrat al-awliyā*, 17–18 §35; cf. S. Sviri, ‘Questions and Answers: A Literary Dialogue between al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (9<sup>th</sup> century) and Ibn al-‘Arabī (12–13<sup>th</sup> centuries)’, in Y. Friedman and E. Kohlberg (eds), *Festschrift for Shaul Shaked* (Jerusalem 2016).

<sup>80</sup> See e.g. *Sīrat al-awliyā*, 103 §132: ‘... the holy man who is drawn-up [by God] (*al-walī al-majdhūb*) needs a certain span of time in his being drawn, in the same way that the effortful *walī* needs it in his sincerity (*ṣidq*); except that the latter’s purification (*taṣfiya*) depends on his own efforts, whereas the purification of the drawn-up *walī*, God takes charge of it with His lights (*yatawallāhā ‘llāhu bi-anwārihi*)...

<sup>81</sup> See *Sīrat al-awliyā*, ed. B. Radtke, 16–17.

[characters] ensue'.<sup>82</sup> Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī comments on this tradition: 'Good soil produces even-tempered and noble souls with no dryness (*kazāza*), aridity (*yubūsa*) or dishevelment (*shu'ūtha*) in them; they are free and noble; their mothers bore them [free] from the yoke and desires of the self (*min riqqi 'l-nufūsi wa-shahawātihā*). As for the others, their soil was rugged (*kānati 'l-ḥuzūnātu fī turbatihim*), and from this [kind of soil], dryness, dishevelment and hardness ensued; their mothers bore them slaves; the yoke and desires of their selves dominate them'.<sup>83</sup> Evidently, al-Tirmidhī's approach is nothing if not extremely deterministic: human character and destiny are predetermined and built into the very fabric (we would say DNA) of one's nature at the onset of creation and birth. Such an approach draws intriguing ethno-theological and ethical conclusions, which I shall not address in the context of this paper. From a comparative perspective, however, I shall make the following observations: the expression 'free and noble' in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's works, as well as in a few other Muslim sources, almost always occurs in the context of a sermon attributed to Jesus (ʿĪsā ibn Maryam).<sup>84</sup> Thus, in a sermon adduced in ch. 67 of the *Nawādir*, from which we have been citing, Jesus admonishes the Children of Israel saying: '[You are] neither fearful slaves nor free noblemen' (*lā 'abīd atqiyā' wa-lā aḥrār kuramā*). 'What he means', explains al-Tirmidhī, is this: 'You are neither as slaves (*'abīd*) who struggle with their selves and are fearful of God (*yujāhidūna anfusahum wa-yattaqūna 'llāha*); nor are you as freemen (*min al-aḥrār*) who were liberated from the yoke of the self and travel to God as noblemen, without swerving and with no hesitation (*fa-sārū ilā 'llāhi ta'ālā sayra 'l-kirāmi bi-lā ta'rījīn wa-lā taraddudin*'.<sup>85</sup> To paraphrase, this is how al-Tirmidhī seems to understand Jesus's admonition: O Children of Israel, you belong neither to the one nor to the other of the two types of the 'friends of God'. Via this

<sup>82</sup> See *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, ch. 67, 96: *inna 'llāha ta'ālā khalaqa ādama min qabḍatin qabaḍahā min jamī'i 'l-ardī fa-jā'a banū ādama 'alā qadri 'l-ardī... wa-min dhālika 'l-sahlu wa'l-ḥaznu wa'l-khabīthu wa'l-ṭayyibu*. It is worth noting that ch. 67 is one of the longest and most challenging chapters in the *Nawādir* (pp. 95–107). It hinges on far-reaching ethno-theological concepts based on the binary principle which lies at the heart of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's worldview.

<sup>83</sup> See op. cit.; for a description of the 'drawn-up *walī* (*al-walī al-majdhūb*)' as being from 'good soil' (*ṭayyib al-turba*), see *Sīrat al-awliyā'*, 104 §133.

<sup>84</sup> See e.g. Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā' wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā'* (Beirut 1418/1997), vol. 6, 304 (No. 8714); also Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-Zuhd al-kabīr* (Beirut 1996), 167.

<sup>85</sup> See *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, ch. 67, 96.

exhortation al-Tirmidhī takes the binary typology of the *awliyā'* back to Jesus. Such a typology may, indeed, reflect the Pauline distinction between the 'sons of the free woman' and the 'sons of the slave woman' (see Paul's Epistle to the Galatians 4:21–31). This association may be supported by the fact that the very same chapter of the *Nawādir* (ch. 67) deals, primarily, with the superiority of the Arabs, *banū ismā'īl*, over the Israelites, *banū isrā'īl*. This reads like a polemical retort; for in his epistle, Paul proclaims the superiority of the Children of Israel, those who follow Jesus, over the Ishmaelite: those who follow Jesus he identifies as the descendants of Sarah, the free woman, while the Ishmaelite are the descendants of Hagar, the slave woman.

The issue of ethno-spiritual and religious superiority in its wider, complex polemical context, especially in view of late-antique Christian (or Judaeo-Christian) ideologies, merits further exploration.<sup>86</sup> Within the limits of this paper, however, suffice it to say that whatever the pre-Islamic background for this polemic, for al-Tirmidhī the designation 'free and noble', with its distinct Christian echoes, lies at the heart of a teaching which upholds a universalistic deterministic typology, marking apart human beings, societies, ethnic groups and religions at large and, among them, in particular, the holy men.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have linked two seemingly dissimilar kinds of material: a personal account of a dream together with programmatic texts presenting key concepts regarding the holy man and the spiritual hierarchy in early Islam. This linkage was facilitated by the fact that both kinds of material were authored by the third/ninth century mystic al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, in whose *oeuvre* the holy men or, more appropriately, the 'friends of God', occupy a central position. Moreover, his writings in this regard had a significant impact on the teachings

<sup>86</sup> For the polemical context suggested here, note the references made by S. Pines to passages from the fourth century pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones* VIII, 53, 2, in which a distinction is made between Ishmael, born to Abraham illegitimately from Hagar when Abraham was still in a state of ignorance, and Isaac, born from Sarah, the legitimate wife, after Abraham had attained God's knowledge. Another relevant passage referred to by Pines is the *Historia Ecclesiastica* by Sozomenus, a fifth century Christian church historian from Palestine. Pines argues for Judaeo-Christian reflections in these sources. See S. Pines, 'Jāhiliyya and 'Ilm', *JSAI* 13 (1990), 175–94, at 182ff and 185, note 26. For this reference I am indebted to Dr Michael Ebstein.

on *wilāya* in Islamic mysticism at large. The dream, unlike the programmatic texts, is presented in a direct and straightforward style and does not offer any analysis or interpretation. Yet it is a 'text', and as such susceptible to all that readers do with texts, i.e. interpret them, comment on them, break them down, and compare them with other texts. Texts reflect their environment, not only in historical and sociological terms but also in conceptual and doctrinal terms. In early Islam, with prophecy coming to an end in the wake of the Prophet Muḥammad, one of the most urgent settings was the need to formulate and legitimize a strategy for the continuation of the God-man relationship and communication. Both the dream and the programmatic texts around it reveal a historical and religious setting in which this continuity was delegated to the 'friends of God', the *awliyā'*. This reflects the position, adopted sweepingly by Ṣūfism, according to which the true successors of the Prophet, alluded to in the maxim *inna warathata 'l-anbiyā' 'l-'ulamā'u* (the successors of the prophets are the religious scholars), are identified as the *awliyā'*. From this perspective, the '*ulamā'*' are those endowed with divine knowledge, those who possess an inspired 'knowledge of God', *al-'ilm bi-'llāh*. This position adds an important perspective to the copiously studied topic of debates in early Islam around the question of post-prophetic succession and authority. It points to a teaching according to which, beyond political power-struggles between religious scholars and community leaders, another option was also upheld: the supreme authority of the spiritual hierarchy of holy men; an authority which, for some, possessed an overriding and divinely inspired power. But the veneration of the holy men in early Islam, be they the *awliyā'* or the Shī'ite Imāms, was not an isolated intra-Islamic phenomenon. It reflects the beliefs, traditions, and images which pervaded the religious scene in Late Antiquity prior to the rise of Islam. In Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism and other Gnostic schools such as Mandaeism, the notion of men (and sometimes women), distinguished from other believers by virtue of special qualities granted by divine grace and election was widespread and pervasive. In *The Making of Late Antiquity* Peter Brown describes Late Antiquity as an era that saw 'the rise of a body of men led by self-styled "friends of God", who claimed to have found dominance over the "earthly" forces of their world through a special relation to heaven'.<sup>87</sup> These friends of God, according to Peter Brown, constituted 'a group made separate

<sup>87</sup> See P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge MA 1978 and 1993), 56.

from and far superior to, their fellow men by reason of a special intimacy with the divine'.<sup>88</sup> In Islam, the post-Prophetic vacuum which motivated the construction of distinctive theological doctrines, when combined with the pervasive elevation of the Man of God throughout Late Antiquity, marks the phenomenon of the spiritual hierarchy as a ubiquitous and continuous presence from the dawn of mankind and from very early Islamic history. This is well attested to in both Shi'ism and Sūfism. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's distinction between the, to him erroneous, Shi'ite doctrine of the holy man as contingent on genealogy (*nasab*) and kinship (*ahl al-bayt*) and between, to him the true, affiliation (*nasab, nisba*) which is based not on blood but on a special spiritual relationship with God, still awaits scholarly attention.<sup>89</sup> In this respect al-Tirmidhī's writings offer a rare and fairly early outlook of the struggle, especially against the background of Imāmate theology, for the formation of a non-sectarian ideology of the *awliyā'*, an inclusive ideology which allowed for people with the appropriate qualities to be heralded as carriers of divine inspiration and authority, regardless of their genealogical affiliations.

From the perspective of such a worldview of the spiritual hierarchy, there is clearly a need to introduce comparative aspects into the study of Islamic mysticism, and in particular to the study of its formative period. Notions and depictions of the 'holy men' in early Islam are not sheer direct borrowings from other traditions; but neither can they be described as an entirely independent and original development of Islamic spirituality. Rather, they continue and confirm spiritual trends and patterns which had persisted for centuries in the rich religious and cultural sphere of Late Antiquity while, at the same time, forging a distinctive theological environment and formulating an indigenous religious vocabulary and syntax. To this syntax belongs the binary structure which pervades al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's writings. According to this binarity, ordinary worshippers (*al-'ubbād*) are distinguished from the 'eminently just ones' (*al-ṣiddīqūn*); in the dream under discussion, this is symbolized by withering basil for the one type versus evergreen myrtle for the other. At the same time, as in many of al-Tirmidhī's works, the *ṣiddīqūn*, those at the higher ranks

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> See e.g. *Sīrat al-awliyā'* 44 §64: 'Then, when God took to Him His Prophet, God's blessings be on him, He placed in his community forty righteous people (*ṣayyara fī ummatihī arba'īna ṣiddīqān*) due to whom the earth subsists (*bihim taqūmu 'l-ardū*); these are the people of his household and family (*fā-hum ahlū baytihi wa-ālihī*)'; also *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, chs 50–1, 68ff and ch. 222, 263ff.

of *wilāya*, are distinguished also from the ‘just ones’ (*al-ṣādiqūn*), thus suggesting an additional inner hierarchical structure, also typologically binary. In fact, the binary syntax goes beyond the realm of the holy man: Ṣūfī culture and vocabulary are immersed in it.<sup>90</sup> The formation of a binary vocabulary and outlook in the formative period of Islamic mysticism and within the demands of a firm monotheistic creed is yet another central theme with comparative overtones to which al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī is one of the most prolific contributors.

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<sup>90</sup> See S. Sviri, ‘Between Fear and Hope. On the Coincidence of Opposites in Islamic Mysticism’, *JSAI* 9 (1987), 316–49.